

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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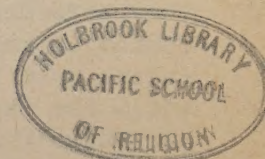
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RURAL LIFE OBJECTIVES In the Church of the Brethren

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FOREWORD

With the growing interest in rural life there is need for some agreement as to our objectives. In a sense there is but one objective, the dedication of life and resources to the kingdom of God. This would mean:

- Stronger rural churches.
- Christian home life.
- A high degree of land and home ownership by the people.
- Trained leadership.
- More vocational opportunities for youth in rural areas.
- Wholesome recreation.
- Proper health and educational facilities.
- Stewardship of the soil and other resources.
- A vision of rural life at its best.

The Church of the Brethren is linked with a deep rural heritage. We are proud of our city churches, but they too maintain a strong reliance upon rural life. In several respects the farm family is the growing edge of the church.

But a study of membership trends in 340 communities for the year 1922 to 1942 shows that we are steadily withdrawing from the countryside. At the same time others, with perhaps more foresight than we have, are establishing bases there to claim for their people the values which rural life provides.

The program of the rural church is broad and no statement here can be complete. We can only mention lines of emphasis which lead toward more wholesome home life and help to build the Christian community. The notes are mature in that nothing is offered which has not been successfully applied.

The following rural life objectives are based upon findings of institutes and conversations with pastors and farm people across the brotherhood.

I. BUILDING THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

We have accepted too generally the idea that there is a "surplus" of young people in the country and that perhaps half or more must move on. It is true, some should enter

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vocations other than farming. It does not follow that all must withdraw from the countryside, and add further to the congestion of cities. If we accept the task of building great rural communities, new sources of employment arise.

There is demand for skilled rural doctors. Fourteen hundred counties in the United States are without hospitals and many rural sections are without medical care. Deaths of mothers at childbirth are still too high. Only twenty-five per cent of rural mothers have hospital care at childbirth, while eighty-four per cent of city births are in hospitals.

We have done well to send missionary doctors to isolated corners of the earth. They have healed the sick and have helped to build great Christian communities where Christ is known and the church is strong. More of that should be done. We should now invite more trained young people to enter rural areas in America where they can help to build the Christian community, and serve where needs are greatest. Rural people may not pay large fees, but they will reward those who locate among them and serve in the spirit of the Great Physician.

The rural community today offers the doctor reasonable opportunities for advancement. A good hospital need not be large, and a city office is no longer essential to success. Grenfell of Labrador was primarily a country doctor. Albert Schweitzer practices among rural people. In India, Sir William Wanless built his clinic in an open field. People from nearby farms and villages were his first patients. Later, some came from as far as Egypt and South Africa, but his hospital remained largely a rural enterprise.

In education there is a great need for young people who choose rural teaching as a career. The poorest land supports the largest families. It also bears the heaviest educational burden. While this condition is more common in the South it is present more or less in all of our regions. Nearly half the children of rural America are underprivileged in regard to schooling. Upon their training depends to a large extent our family life, our statesmanship and our churchmanship for the future.

Our colleges have done well to train young people for teaching. One wonders if those trained have always been called and used with foresight. Some churches have received a fair number of such leaders. Others have given heavily, but have received none. It would mean much if young people in training could know they will be needed as part of a growing Christian community.

Soil conservation, co-operatives, local industries and public welfare are other areas which might be entered without leaving the country. It would be hard to overestimate the contribution which devoted young people can make if they choose rural life at its best as their heritage.

Youth and Agriculture

Rather thoughtlessly we have accepted the idea that there must be larger and larger and fewer and fewer farms. In one area studied there are three farms having a total of 2,600 acres. They have grown up since 1936 by combining what had been ten farm homes. The church and the community are both dying. The agriculture teacher observed, "I do not know why I am teaching these boys agriculture. There is little open for them here except jobs for a few as hired men."

We had in 1942 over 50,000 unemployed youth in rural Ohio alone. Then we solved the problem by sending them off to war. We had nearly 4,000,000 migrant laborers moving from farm to farm with children often enrolled in neither public school nor Bible school. While farming is a great industry, it should remain an enterprise of homes, of schools, of churches, of reasonable security and of spiritual qualities.

One of the great tasks before the rural church is in helping to work out a better

educational adjustment of young people. Communities must become more flexible and provide ways for growth. Land and other resources must be used in a spirit of worthy stewardship. What is everyone's responsibility often remains undone. Several districts have appointed Rural Life Committees for study, counsel and help in the development of Christian communities. The work of such groups is varied.

- (1) They may co-operate with colleges in the training and placement of young people where they can live and serve to the best advantage. This would apply to medical graduates, teachers, craftsmen, agriculturists and others. Some churches are supplied with trained leadership while others are in great need.
- (2) They can be of help in the transfer and location of families desiring to move. Many would prefer to remain within the church fellowship if arrangements could be made.
- (3) They can be ready for help and counsel in matters of land investment, settlement of estates and the promotion of rural life interests.

There might well be an assignment of responsibility to several in each local church.

The question arises as to whether or not this would imply a community made up of members of one faith or denomination only. It does not. A church strong enough to serve its membership will be concerned to co-operate with all in working for the welfare of the total community. However, a church needs its group of member families large enough and linked closely enough to make its contribution effective.

II. FORESIGHT IN THE SETTLEMENT OF ESTATES

Children often migrate while parents remain on the farm alone. During long absence heirs lose contact. When the estate is sold it often goes to the highest bidder regardless of its place in the family and community. Heirs, if approached in time, will often be friendly to a plan for keeping the home within the family and the religious fellowship of their parents.

In some instances a son or daughter remains to operate the farm and care for the parents. It is easy for absent children to overlook the service thus performed. When the estate is finally settled it is common for those absent to overestimate its value and the one at home has to pay heavily if he wishes to remain.

Recently at an auction the son-in-law stood among those bidding for the farm. It was his hope to buy the place which had been his wife's home, and where they had reared a family. He raised his offer several times, then turned away, outbid by one buying for speculation. Later we saw him move toward the house to inform his wife that their days in the home place had come to an end.

Almost every community has similar cases. Likely the other heirs just did not think. Someone from the local parish might have been alert long before the sale to say what the daughter and the son-in-law could not say for themselves. Moderate compensation for service in caring for the parents would have made it possible to keep the home within the family. While recognizing the property rights of all concerned, the pastor and a few local men working tactfully can often prevent such misfortunes.

A happier solution was reached where a son had remained. The farm was appraised by order of the heirs and then a price determined which took account of all circumstances. In accepting title the son declared, "While I assume ownership, to the rest of you it must always be home. The room in which father and mother lived will remain largely as it is. This has been our home as a family. It must remain so."

Space does not allow us to consider here the methods of appraisal in the settlement of estates, but we shall have advanced far if we begin to think in terms of transfer of land within the family and community rather than of merely selling out with each generation.

III. PRESERVING THE FAMILY-TYPE FARM

Of recent years there is a tendency to combine farms, making very large and highly mechanized units. This might mean a little more profit for an individual or a corporation, but it deprives others of homes. It also leads to a landless farm labor class and the breakdown of rural institutions. Some countries facing revolution today have a surging class of landless laborers on the one hand and permanent landlordism on the other. Wider distribution of land and home ownership strengthens the church and stabilizes the family and the state.

Financing the Purchase of Land

Land prices are high and may remain so for some years. But, there still are farms reasonably priced. One should wait for these rather than risk too much. In a period of depression the tenant is often better off than the owner carrying a heavy mortgage. While we favor the ownership of land just as far as possible, care must be used. Accurate appraisal is required.

Use of Church Resources

Various church agencies have funds to invest. These can be so used as to promote home ownership. Improved methods of appraisal make such loans one of the best forms of investment. Colleges serve a useful purpose with their endowment resources. Certain local churches and district boards have funds which might be used in this way.

Through the Parish Loan Plan, the General Mission Board has made a sum available to encourage the establishment of families on the land. It provides a long-term loan at a moderate rate of interest. Details concerning this and other types of loans available can be had upon inquiry.

Land Transfer by Rental Payments

An agreement can be made whereby payments of rent are applied to the purchase price of a farm. Payments will ordinarily be more than the customary amount of rent, to provide for interest on unpaid balances and for the gradual transfer of ownership. The amount of payment varies with circumstances just as share rent. In case of misfortune or depression, foreclosure is much less likely.

Given a careful appraisal and both landlord and tenant prepared to deal fairly, this plan has much to commend it. For the seller it offers a steady and secure income over a period of years. The buyer can establish his family and begin paying for a home earlier than would be possible if he should wait until he can buy under mortgage. In this respect the plan is helpful for those starting from the bottom. We found one young man who had begun paying for his farm at the age of twenty-four. Since the purchaser becomes a co-owner from the start, the place is better cared for than under renting.

There has been enough experience with this method to give us full confidence. It is well adapted to the transfer of land within the family, since emphasis is more upon transfer than outright sale. Those having funds to invest might do well to buy a farm properly appraised and realize the rent and income while it is being transferred to some worthy couple. Such transactions require integrity and character in both parties.

Further details are available to those who are interested.

Farm Home Procurement

Under normal conditions good farms are scarce. Young people away in school are out of touch with opportunities and needs. Others may wish to migrate to another area. Many churches appoint some one to keep informed and offer information as needed.

Card forms for listing information are available to those who ask for them.

The rural pastor more than anyone else is concerned with the full welfare of the family. The church because of its leadership and close contact is in a position to help preserve and rebuild rural America after a pattern of family farm and home ownership.

IV. IMPROVED METHODS OF RENTING

The church is concerned about right relationships between people and the land which is their source of life. Tenancy serves a useful purpose for many. Some can get started easily in this way. For others it is more desirable to operate good rented land with adequate equipment than to own poorer land. However, it is important that tenancy remain at a minimum and that renting take place on levels which are fair to both landlord and tenant.

There are in general four tests that can be applied to a lease:

1. Fair Division. Is there a fair division of products between landlord and tenant? Does each receive in proportion to what he contributes? Under the fifty-fifty arrangement this is customary for poor land to rent too high. It costs the tenant as much or more to operate poor land and his risk is greater. The result is often permanent tenancy and soil depletion. With a wide variety of farms and soil types, there could hardly be one form of division that would apply alike in all cases. There are ways of calculation to determine whether or not the division is fair.

2. Terms of Occupancy. Does the tenant have reasonable assurance of continued occupancy? Tenancy of a year-to-year nature is bad for the landlord, the tenant and the farm. Family life, the church and the school all suffer from short-term tenancy. Studies show that children of those who move frequently are generally retarded in school. Such families usually have little part in church and community life. The pastor of a church in a high-tenancy area observed almost in despair, "I work all year to piece together a church organization only to see it disrupted each spring when moving starts."

3. Soil Conservation. Is the soil properly cared for? This protects the owner, the tenant and the community. Often a rented farm is a depleted and eroded farm. Where this occurs, the next step is "eroded" home and family life. Good husbandry which builds up the soil is the most profitable in the long run. The investor can cause serious injury to both land and people if he looks to the land for income without plan for its maintenance.

On the other hand, the farm owner who has toiled long years to pay for a place naturally wants a tenant who will care for the property and return it in good condition. Many problems of renting disappear where both landlord and tenant enter into a partnership realizing that their interests are mutual.

4. Encourage Home Ownership. Is the lease designed to encourage farm home ownership? There will be instances where land ownership may not be feasible, but the present movement toward permanent landlordism and permanent tenancy must be discouraged.

The church has not been as sensitive as it should have been in matters of land distribution. Forty out of every one hundred farmers depend on rented land and the amount of tenancy is increasing. It is urgent, therefore, that all possible steps be taken to develop forms of renting that lead toward ownership rather than permanent tenancy.

V. USE OF FATHER-SON PARTNERSHIPS

The father-son partnership is often the only way open for a young man to start farming. It is also one of the best ways. Modern equipment makes it possible for the father to go on operating by himself after the son has grown, but reorganization of the farm under a partnership with the son can result in profit and satisfaction for both. Often some additional land can be purchased or rented.

The importance of such partnerships in preserving wholesome family bonds and strengthening the community cannot be overemphasized. A study of various types of partnerships is now in progress. It is hoped that information acquired will be helpful to others.

VI. WISE USE OF CO-OPERATIVE ORGANIZATION

Rural people will no doubt continue to depend on co-operation. They are faced by two alternatives. The one is to do more things for themselves through co-operation. The other would be increased government controls which they do not desire. The principles of co-operation are democratic, and, when used at their best, co-operative associations offer educational and character values as well as economic help.

Co-operative credit unions have been used in several church communities to supply needs not met otherwise. The union is apart from the local church organization. It is an association of those who wish to meet certain needs by working together. Depending chiefly upon character loans, it serves a useful purpose, especially among those who lack the equity for getting help through customary channels. This also provides a means whereby those having surplus capital can make it available to others in a systematic way.

Credit can be abused as well as used. Too easy credit which tempts men to make unwise adventures can become as much of an evil as the lack of it. The credit committee carries a heavy responsibility since it deals not only in other people's money but influences lives. All transactions even though within a personal group should be safeguarded by businesslike procedure.

Premature efforts must be avoided. A study should first be made of needs and the possibility of meeting them through co-operative endeavor. It would seem that a larger number of our communities might be using co-operative efforts to advantage.

Co-operation With Other Churches and Agencies

Keeping within its major purpose, the church can join hands as far as possible with other agencies working for the improvement of rural life. Among these are 4-H clubs, Future Farmers of America, the Agricultural Extension Service, Home Demonstration, Soil Conservation and certain others which have worthy contributions to make toward the welfare of the whole community. As we have successful men's work projects we could also be linking young people in 4-H clubs with the objectives and support of the church. The different church denominations need to find ways for co-operation in order to unify and encourage the finer interests of life.

VII. DIRECTED MUTUAL AID

There are some who feel that informal mutual help no longer exists. While there is a woeful lack, one is heartened by numerous examples of helpfulness. A few months ago a family met serious misfortune. This was mentioned at the Sunday service and within an hour a gift of ninety dollars was taken to the home with assurance of the concern of the local church.

In another community a large amount of capital and equipment is loaned by individuals to those needing such help. Part of the money is provided without interest, but in harmony with sound business practice. Often the one rendering help is in position to offer valuable counsel.

Because of Selective Service and outside employment many churches have lost a major part of their young people. No other agency is so well qualified to help them to become re-established as is the local church. What better use could be made of our resources? Much of the future depends upon what is done now in this regard.

It would seem that in each locality there should be definite direction given to the spirit and practice of mutual help. There are often those who have capital they would like to see used in promoting the welfare of the community. Others have land that they would sell if approached. Young people of character often need substantial loans which can be arranged informally. Assistance should not be limited to those who are within the church fellowship. The committee itself need not handle funds or assume financial obligation. Its services are of more value if advisory.

I have met no one who asks anything for nothing. It cannot be stressed too much that character loans are probably one of our safest investments. However, safety need not be always our first consideration. Times have changed radically and if strategic communities are to be saved, suitable measures must be taken.

VIII. EDUCATION FOR RURAL LIFE

Agriculture and rural life are in the process of important change. The application of power, especially electricity, has scarcely begun. Much of the isolation and squalor is gone. While there has been much gain, we often stress materialistic achievements to the neglect of more enduring values. In recreation, family life, and in education we shall have to set standards based upon enduring social and spiritual values rather than trust too far the leadership of those motivated by the desire for profit alone.

Studies of rural social and economic movements can be helpful. Within the community, groups might study questions of taxation, methods for renting land, the use of credit, co-operative organization, and steps for preserving social and spiritual qualities of rural life. Our colleges are offering their services at this point. Studies and surveys of church membership trends can be helpful. Rural Life Institutes have value for sharing views and experience and for setting goals. In that respect they become the basis for meeting problems of a local nature.

We need to rethink the dignity and value of work. Henry Van Dyke's words, "Honest toil is holy service; faithful work is praise and prayer," apply especially to dignified, creative work on the land. Parents have at times offered a soft life to young people when they really desired opportunities for creative work and the sharing of responsibility.

In our world, substitutes are somewhat common and there is much that is artificial. Styles and models may change frequently. But nature goes on producing with marvelous regularity. The grain of each harvest comes forth with almost unvarying quality. We have come to associate stability and a certain genuineness of character with life linked to the soil.

IX. THE CHURCH AND THE FARM PROBLEM

While rural life has its compensations, it is easy to become sentimental. Recently a man who perhaps understood the pen better than the plow wrote, "The farmer is of all men the most carefree. He can lie down at night, lulled to sleep by the lowing of cattle, and rest carefree until awakened by the robin's song in the morning." To those familiar with agriculture, there is a "farm problem", and it is real. With 6,000,000 separate farms, fixed costs, changing seasons, and varying demands, the farmer meets genuine problems. Too often he has labored only to find the products of his toil and expense declared "surpluses" which react to his disaster.

The major part of what the consumer pays in the case of clothing and food is for processing and handling. Under these circumstances a reasonable price to the farmer would add but little to the cost of living. Of course, there may always be some lack of

parity between farm and city prices. The church cannot take up this problem directly, but it can at least lend an informed and sympathetic voice in behalf of those whose homes suffer injustice.

In the future the concern of farm people will not end with the production of good crops. More and more they will see their job as that of feeding the world. They will not be content to see their "surplus" crops rot in the field while millions at home and abroad go hungry.

The practice of taxing the farm regardless of its income presents a serious problem. In times of depression this has resulted in an excessive amount of foreclosure.

Present bidding for farms by those in occupations more profitable than farming has pushed land prices to a point where it is hard to pay for land by the sale of products. In a locality visited recently, businessmen from a distant city own nearly as much land as the local people themselves. A major part of the rural problem is man's relation to the land. Shall the farmer remain an owner or shall he be required increasingly to till land owned by others? Most of us would be alarmed at any suggestion of public ownership of land. We should be equally concerned over conditions which are bringing such suggestions to the horizon more rapidly than is commonly realized.

However, the young man and woman of initiative and ability who choose rural life with pride will find a rewarding and satisfying career. They will not enjoy luxury, but they will live well. There will not be wealth but reasonable comfort and security. More than this, they have access to forms of home and civic life and a relationship to God commonly enjoyed by those who live near the soil.

"-Seek Ye First-"

Let us not confuse means with ends. Land and home ownership alone will not lead to our desired destiny. The problems of rural life are also spiritual problems, which center in man's relationship to himself, to his neighbor and to God. Soil conservation for example, is more than a civic duty. It involves the stewardship of God-given resources.

Men who seek first the kingdom of God will find help in deciding how much property one should own and the manner in which it can best be used. Those devoted to God's high purposes will ponder well before they pull land resources away from others just because they have the economic strength to do so.

Similarly, in co-operation at its best, Christian men can find an ideal atmosphere for practicing the Golden Rule. However, given to selfish motives, co-operation loses its value.

The ultimate objective in rural life emphasis is building the kingdom of God and leading men in obedience to his will as revealed in Christ. This would require Christian living in the field, in the market place, in the home and in the church.

And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with me (Lev. 25:23).